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Wycliffe Diego and the Draft Law on Autonomy In July 1985, the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua proposed a partial autonomy plan to bring about an end to fighting on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. The peoples of this Atlantic Coastal region, the indigenous Miskitu peoples chief among them, had long believed themselves to be independent of the Spanish Catholic state that was based on colonial institutions on the nation's Pacific Coast. The situation in Nicaragua at the time of the autonomy resolution was exceedingly complex. In 1979, the Sandinista government had toppled the dictatorship of Antonio Somoza. Since that time, they had been attempting to consolidate their authority throughout the territory of the nation-state. This attempt had been made more difficult by the splintering of factions that arose from the revolution. These factions included the US-supported contra movement that was made up in large part of former Somoza National Guardsmen and the similarly US-supported Miskitu groups that saw the encroachment of the Sandinista state as a threat to their traditional autonomy. In the years prior to the drafting of this autonomy law, fighting had raged between these factions. The result was the formation and dissolution of multiple coalitions and alliances from across the political spectrum. Wycliffe Diego was one key player in this constant flux of coalitions. Diego was a Moravian pastor as well as being a Miskitu. At the age of 32 he helped to organize the indigenous self-help and Indian rights organization Alpromisu (Alliance for the Promotion of the Miskito and Sumo Peoples). This organization existed for six years until the Sandinistas reorganized it as a part of the larger umbrella group Misurasata (Miskito, Sumo, Rama, Sandinista All Together) in 1979. It was as a part of this organization that Diego was forced to work closely with two other strong advocates for Miskitu rights and self-rule, Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth. This uneasy alliance dismantled in 1981 when the Atlantic Coast region was under increasing pressure from the Sandinista government. Fagoth would go on to ally his supporters with the US-trained and financed FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) in 1983, while Rivera became more conciliatory and willing to negotiate with the Sandinista government. Diego, who was less a fighter than an activist and organizer, remained a part of Misurasata with Rivera. However, his position on negotiations with the Sandinistas was more undecided. When the Draft Autonomy law was proposed in 1985, Diego and Misurasata had just recently reentered into an alliance with Fagoth's newly formed Misura, who had recently suspended his alliance with the FDN. The goal of this new alliance was to resist exploitation from both the Sandinistas and the contras. However, it is seems very unlikely that this was a solid alliance. The splintering of the previous five years must have weighed very heavily on the alliance members. Only six months prior to this new alliance, Rivera had been deep in negotiations with the Sandinistas and even more recently, Fagoth had been fighting with the FDN. Such was the situation when the Sandinista government proposed the Draft Autonomy Law. It seems likely that Diego would have been supportive of most aspects of the new autonomy law. As a Miskitu, he would have agreed "the peoples and communities of the Atlantic Coast have specific characteristics of language, culture, forms of organization, and economic relations that differentiate them from the rest of the Nicaraguan people." He also probably would have supported the law's recognition of indigenous peoples' land rights. These terms would be seen as a first step to the exercise of full autonomy on the Atlantic Coast. However, there is much in this autonomy pact that Diego would likely have found objectionable. First, item 12 under the subheading Principles and Objectives of the Regional Autonomy states "The rights of autonomy of the indigenous peoples and communities of the Atlantic Coast do not lessen or diminish the rights and obligations they have as Nicaraguan citizens." Clever lawyers could eventually use such a clause to totally undermine the autonomy pact. Though the same draft autonomy law protects indigenous land rights, if these rights are suspended among the general population of Nicaragua, then they could also be suspended among the Miskitu. Item two under the subheading Powers of the Central Government is even more ominous than this inclusion to bear all obligations of Nicaraguan citizens. It states "the central government defines the policies, lines of work, and obligatory norms, exercising the following powers...Internal security of the state and regulation of the citizenry." This clause gives the government free rein in almost all aspects of civic and private life within the borders of the Nicaraguan nation state. This type of statement allows for the development of a totalitarian state,

as there are no explicit safeguards to define what constitutes "internal security" or "regulation of the citizenry." The draft autonomy statute allows significant participation in the creation and implementation of policies that affect the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast. Diego likely would have recognized this fact. Perhaps he would have seen this bill as a starting point for the further solidification of self-rule on the Coast. His decision to remain a part of Misurasata with Rivera rather than to jump ship to the FDN with Fagoth may be the most telling demonstration of his true goals. By 1985, Diego seems to have been working for the best possible compromise for "his" people. He was Miskitu. He was a pastor. In looking out for the best interests of his flock, he may have been able to overlook some obvious inconsistencies in the draft autonomy law and to have seen the law as the best possible alternative. This idealistic interpretation of support for the draft autonomy is not the only possible reason for believing Diego would support the law. By summer 1985, US-support for rebel movements in Nicaragua was changing. In 1984, the FDN's mining of Nicaraguan ports caused the suspension of funding to contra rebels. This likely had a profound practical impact on the Miskitu resistance movement. To many lawmakers in the United States, rebels in Nicaragua likely seemed virtually indistinguishable and a suspension of aid to one rebel group was the same as to all, particularly because of the fluidity of anti-Sandinista coalitions. Diego and his movement were likely suffering this crunch by summer 1985. For this practical reason of declining supplies and the uncertain prospect of their eventual increase, Diego may have been more inclined to accept the autonomy proposal in an effort to make the best possible deal. These dual aspects of Diego's situation in summer 1985 (continued alliance with Rivera and the uncertainty of further US aid) suggest that he would have been supportive of the draft autonomy law. He likely would have sought to maintain the coalition with Rivera and Fagoth, as all were working towards autonomy. However, he would probably remain fearful of the permanence of any coalition, which would impel him (as it would Rivera and Fagoth) to constantly be on the lookout for new coalition opportunities that would maximize each individual's benefits.